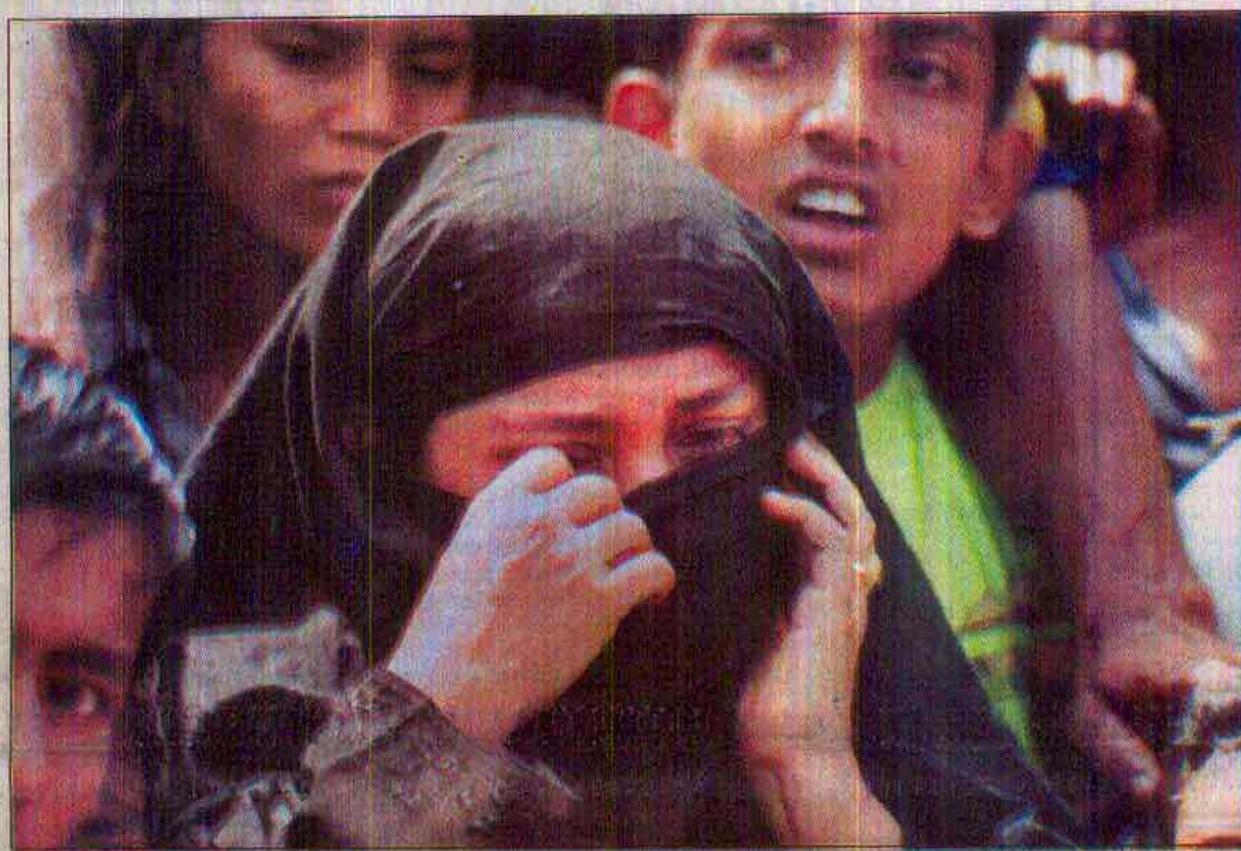




600 feared drowned in launch capsized

Strong Meghna currents keep rescuers at bay in Chandpur; vessel still untraced; 3 bodies retrieved; 150 swim ashore



A woman fights her tears back as she waits on the river bank in Chandpur yesterday for her relatives, feared drowned in the Meghna. The triple-deck MV Nasrin-1 sank in the turbulent waters of the river Tuesday night.

PHOTO: S K ENAMUL HAQ

SHARIFUL ISLAM, Chandpur

About 600 people were feared drowned when an overcrowded launch capsized after being sucked into a whirlpool in the Meghna at Chandpur on Tuesday night and rescue operations could not be launched because of fierce currents in the river.

The triple-decker MV Nasrin-1 was on its way to Lalmoni on the offshore island of Bhola from Dhaka when it went down in the turbulent confluence of the Padma, Meghna and Dakatia at about 10:45pm in what was the largest launch accident in Bangladesh, survivors said.

About 150 people swam ashore or were rescued on Tuesday night and three bodies were retrieved -- two from the scene and one from Ilisha in Barisal, over 100 kilometres downstream.

The operation to salvage the sunken launch and passengers trapped in the hull could not be started until last night, as furious currents in the rain-swollen river hobbled all attempts.

"When the launch turned to touch Chandpur, a swirling eddy pulled it into its eye, about 600 metres from the pier," said 55-year-old survivor Abdus Salam.

The moment the launch listed to one side, its rear fendered almost vertically, awakening sleeping passengers to dive off, he added.

The missing people included the owner of the sunken launch, surviving craft crew said.

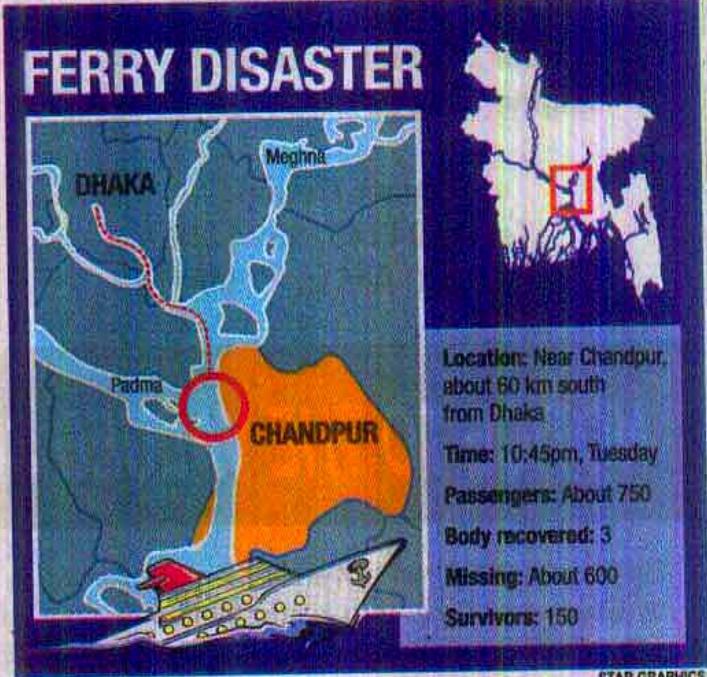
In another accident on the day, 11 workers and passengers were missing when the MV Sadia sank in the Meghna estuary upon a collision with a cargo vessel.

The Meghna estuary is notorious for launch tragedy frequency where the converging currents trigger fatal whirlpools, especially during monsoon when the rain-fed rivers are in spate.

The disasters are also blamed on neglect of safety regulations, structural faults, lax law enforcement and poor weather monitoring.

The MV Nasrin set out from Dhaka at 6:45pm, with about 750 passengers

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Location: Near Chandpur, about 60 km south from Dhaka
Time: 10:45pm, Tuesday
Passengers: About 750
Body recovered: 3
Missing: About 600
Survivors: 150

STAR GRAPHICS



PHOTO: STAR

A diver climbs back to a rescue vessel, now anchored in the Meghna, as he fails to recover any body because of fierce converging currents in the river.

Overloading, apathy blamed for disaster

RAFIQ HASAN

Overloading, inefficiency of captains, flawed design and lack of supervision by the government are the reasons for launch disaster frequency on inland waterways, said marine engineers and shipping officials yesterday.

The MV Nasrin-1 that sank in the Meghna river on Tuesday was overloaded with passengers and cargo.

The non-implementation of the government's safety measures is blamed on a long-standing feud among three groups involved in the

sources.

A few passenger-vessels plying the inland waterways can withstand windy, rough weather, as most are built on faulty designs, said a high official of the shipping ministry among those people, said sources in the shipping department.

Over 2,000 big and medium-sized vessels are plying various routes covering more than 8,000 miles of waterways in Bangladesh.

The non-implementation of the government's safety measures is blamed on a long-standing feud among three groups involved in the

Two bodies formed to probe capsizes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday formed two inquiry committees on two separate launch disasters Tuesday night at the confluence of mighty Meghna, Padma and Dakatia near Chandpur.

Both the committees have been asked to submit their reports within seven days.

The first inquiry committee is formed for the launch MV Nasreen 1, which sank with more than 600 passengers on board in the river

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All went wrong right from go

MORSHED ALI KHAN

With the sudden breakdown of MV Coco's engine at the last moment before departure at the Sadarghat launch terminal at around 6:00pm on Tuesday, the disaster started to brew.

Several hundred passengers to Lalmoni, most of whom were poor city dwellers going home, rushed to MV Nasrin-1, the only other option for them on the day departing at 6:30pm. Soon, the launch, having a capacity to carry 300 passengers, was filled up to the brim.

Nasrin-1 left Sadarghat launch

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Relatives, left, wait on the river bank in Chandpur for rescued passengers; workers, middle, of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society search the river for dead bodies; and salvage vessel Rustam of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority floats in the water without carrying out any rescue operation yesterday. A triple-deck launch went down in the Meghna, being sucked into a whirlpool in the rain-swollen river, with about 750 passengers aboard, just before Tuesday midnight.

No decision yet, but experts opt for limited gas export

PM tells Jatiya Sangsad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia told the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday that the government had not made up its mind as yet on gas export but expert committees recommended limited sale.

Two national expert committees had suggested gas could be exported from the one-third portion retained by the international oil companies

2,500 more bullets recovered in Bogra

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

Police recovered 2,500 more bullets from Gogarpura village of Kahalu upazila in Bogra yesterday.

The bullets, abandoned in a bag on the bank of river Nagar in Gogarpura, were recovered at around 9:30am, said Officer-in-Charge Wahidur Rahman of Kahalu thana.

If the export is allowed, Khaleda said, the pipeline that would be laid

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Daring escape from the dock

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Seventeen accused yesterday caught police totally off guard before fleeing from the dock of the court in Narayanganj.

Appearing before the court for bail in a case of extortion and ransacking, they sprang the surprise when the judge ruled to send them to jail custody.

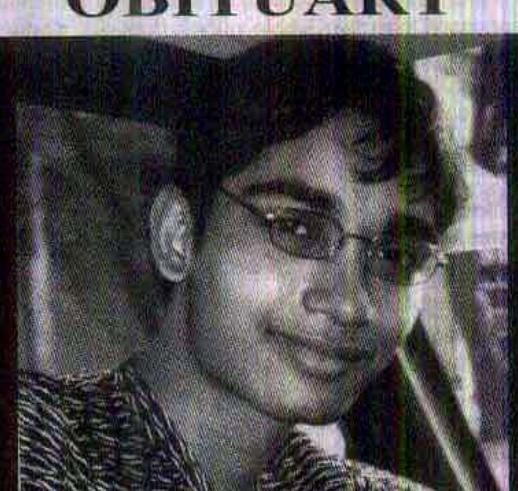
After the ruling was made, three

unarmed and unsuspecting policemen walked up to handcuff them. The accused soon pounced on them and stormed out of the courtroom with all totally taken aback. The stupefied policemen thought better of chasing the culprits fearing more embarrassment.

Talking to journalists later, the judge said after what has happened in the courtroom, the accused now

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

OBITUARY



Saam Ruslan Anando, son of Mr. M. Fazle Selim, Managing Director of Ranks ITT Ltd. and Mrs. Rokhsana Selim (Swapna), died in a car accident on 8th July early morning near Oregon-Nevada border in the USA. He was only 16. Anando was traveling with his parents and sister when their car met with the tragic accident. His parents and sisters were also injured and are in the hospital.

Anando was the only son of Mr. and Mrs. Selim and a nephew of late Dr. Fazle Rabbi, one of the country's prominent surgeon who was killed during the war of liberation. He was a student of grade IX in European Standard School in Dhaka. He was a good singer and earned prominence at this young age participating in various functions. He left behind a lot of friends and admirers.

We request you to kindly pray to Almighty Allah to grant his soul eternal peace in heaven and for the family to give them strength to bear this great loss.

On behalf of Rangs Group and the family members
A. Rouf Chowdhury, Chairman
Tel: 8117066, 9139495, 9139571